

VZCZCXRO8301
RR RUEHDBU
DE RUEHMO #2265/01 3070456
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 030456Z NOV 06
FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4881
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUEHXD/MOSCOW POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 012265

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/RUS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/03/2016

TAGS: PHUM PGOV KDEM SCUL RS

SUBJECT: OWNER VOWS TO PUSH FOR VIGOROUS INVESTIGATION OF GALLERY RANSACKING

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns: 1.4 (b, d).

Summary

¶1. (C) A resolute Marat Gelman told us October 31 that he intended to use his remaining official contacts to energize a languishing criminal investigation of the October 21 attack on his Moscow Gelman Art Gallery. Law enforcement officials had "done nothing" since ten men smashed twenty paintings and beat up Gelman in an attack that could have been provoked by the nationality of the artist being exhibited --Georgian-- or by the gallery's history of displaying work offensive to the sensibilities of nationalists. We will continue to raise our concerns about continued lack of movement of the investigation with appropriate GOR officials. End summary.

What Happened

¶2. (U) As the Moscow media have reported, on October 21 a group of men stormed the central Moscow Gelman Art Gallery, destroying paintings, computer equipment, and beating the gallery's owner Marat Gelman. Observers at the time suggested that ultranationalists may have been behind the attack. They noted that:

-- it came one day after artworks from the Gelman Gallery lampooning President Putin were confiscated at Sheremetevo airport;

-- on display at a time when anti-Georgian passions in Moscow were being stoked, were the works of Georgian artist Aleksandr Dzhikia;

-- Gelman's gallery, which regularly exhibits irreverent art, had been a source of controversy, and similar depredations, in the past.

¶3. (C) Gelman, who was briefly hospitalized after the event, told us October 31 that he had no proof that the attackers were ultranationalists. The ten men who invaded his gallery wore heavy boots and ski caps, and were "methodical, as if they were just doing a day's work." They ordered Gelman's two female assistants to face the wall, beat Gelman, destroyed his computer (which was equipped with a webcam that could have recorded the incident), and savaged twenty paintings before leaving.

¶4. (C) Gelman discovered after ending an enforced period of bed rest that the criminal investigation opened on the day of the incident "had gone nowhere." He planned to use what

connections to the government he retains in an effort to energize law enforcement authorities, but was not hopeful.

Possible Motives

15. (C) Gelman did not know who was behind the attack. "The goal," he said, "was to terrorize by demonstrating that perpetrators of such acts can act with impunity." Gelman suggested two possible hypotheses for the attack:

-- it was the work of rank-and-file nationalists, perhaps off-duty police officers or members of the military, who were riding the wave of anti-Georgian feeling then current in Moscow;

-- behind the sacking was someone in power unhappy with other gallery-sponsored pictures, then en route to London, that lampooned President Putin, and had been confiscated at Sheremetev airport.

16. (C) Gelman did not ascribe the attack to his place on the "enemies" list making the rounds here --recently assassinated journalist Anna Politkovskaya was on that list-- nor was he certain that the Georgian nationality of the artist being exhibited was the cause. The recent history of his gallery notwithstanding, Gelman remained optimistic that contemporary Russian art would triumph over "the forces of darkness," although he conceded that those dark forces were currently in the ascendancy. In a separate conversation, artist Dmitriy Gutov, a well-known contemporary of Gelman's, was less sanguine. Culture in Russia is "hanging by thread," he said. He mentioned last year's attack on the Sakharov Center as another example of creeping intolerance in Russia.

MOSCOW 00012265 002 OF 002

About Gelman and His Gallery

17. (U) Gelman is no stranger to Russian political life. He has worked as a consultant to the Kremlin and, in 1995 co-founded with Gleb Pavlovskiy the pro-Kremlin Foundation for Effective Politics. Gelman as well figured in the creation of the Rodina political party (which merged with the Russian Party of Life and Russian Party of Pensioners on October 28) and was an adviser to Kremlin favorite Viktor Yanukovich in the 2004 Ukrainian presidential elections.

18. (U) The Gelman Gallery was founded in 1990 and has frequently exhibited irreverent art. In 2005, the gallery staged an alternative Moscow Biennale, exhibiting controversial works about Putin, Chechnya, and Russian Orthodoxy not included in the official show. In February 2003, the Gelman Gallery exhibition "Obscene Paintings" was ransacked by two persons disturbed by its content.

Comment

19. (C) It is indeed difficult to pinpoint the exact motive for the October 21 attack. Media accounts of the Sheremetev airport confiscation the day before the rampage may have triggered action by one or another group, or the gallery may have been the victim of a then cresting wave of anti-Georgian sentiment. On the margins of a recent Tretyakov Krimskiy Val Musuem press conference inaugurating an exhibition co-sponsored by the Gelman Foundation, some of the regional museum and gallery owners present worried about creeping public impatience with epatage art, but they seemed to agree with Gelman that perseverance, not retreat, was the only course of action. We will continue to raise our concerns about this case with GOR officials.

BURNS